Keys Traveler
Meetings + Incentives Edition

Resorts Welcome Groups
Experiences Highlight Meetings
Indigenous Keys Seafood
Key Lime Academy

fla-keys.com
Many Florida Keys resorts offer memorable settings for unforgettable outdoor events and programs for groups.

“In the Florida Keys and Key West, it’s all about finding the right fit for your group,” said Jack Meier, group sales manager for the Monroe County Tourist Development Council.

“The Keys are a world away from a typical meeting experience at a mega-metro convention center. Our outdoor wide-open spaces, many of them waterfront, offer a unique advantage,” Meier added.

The private Ocean Reef Club on North Key Largo has 30,000 total square feet of meeting space including a 7,500-square-foot ballroom. Ocean Reef includes a 145-room inn, Buccaneer Island recreational beach and pool area, two 18-hole golf courses, a full-service 175-slip marina and a private airport. meetingsatooceanreef.com

Set on a 15-acre nature sanctuary, Baker’s Cay Resort Key Largo, a Curio Collection by Hilton, has 200 pet-friendly rooms, 17,000 square feet for meetings, two bayfront ballrooms, outdoor event venues and on-site team building. bakerscay.com

The 12-acre “all-inclusive” adults-only 135-unit Bungalows Key Largo features stand-alone bungalows averaging 800 to 900 square feet. On-site amenities include a spa, two pools, three restaurants, Tiki-style boats and 1,000 feet of shoreline. BungalowsKeyLargo.com

Islamorada’s 27-acre, 214-room oceanfront Cheeca Lodge & Spa has acquired 10 private villas. The Casitas at Cheeca Lodge, with personalized butler service, feature one- and two-bedroom units from 750 to 2,100 square feet with full kitchens. With three pools and two Tiki bars, Cheeca has over 6,300 square feet of versatile space and a luxury spa. One ballroom has 2,100 square feet for parties of up to 175, while an 1,870-square-foot ballroom has capacity for 140. cheeca.com

Islamorada’s 25-acre Islander Resort offers contemporary cottage-style accommodations with screened lanais. The resort has a 6,000-square-foot lawn with oceanfront event space, a 2,760-square-foot ballroom and 114 oceanside villas. Nearby Islander Bayside Townhomes offers 25 two-story two-bedroom units. islanderfloridakeys.com

Hawks Cay Resort, a 60-acre destination resort on Duck Key in the Middle Keys, is a AAA Four Diamond recipient and Preferred Lifestyle Collection member. The expansive resort features 177 guestrooms, 250 two- and three-bedroom villas, a full-service marina, saltwater lagoon, spa, adults-only area, multiple outdoor venues and 20,000 square feet of oceanfront meeting and event space. The ballroom hosts 480 banquet-style. Another ballroom can accommodate 450. Upscale dining at Sixty-One Prime and casual marina-side dining at Angler and Ale can both be reserved for private groups. hawkscay.com

The 125-room Faro Blanco Resort and Yacht Club in Marathon offers 1,820 square feet with three meeting rooms, event lawns, marina walkway, Lighthouse Grill and fishing, watersports and sunset cruises.
Faroblanco Resort

Marathon’s newest resort, the 24-acre, 199-unit Isla Bella Beach Resort at mile marker 47 at the Seven Mile Bridge, has more than 20,000 square feet of function space, including a 3,800-square-foot Hibiscus Event Center and 16,000 square feet of outdoor space. Nearly a mile of shoreline includes an oceanfront event area. There’s a marina, a 4,000-square-foot spa, five pools and three food and beverage venues. islabellabeachresort.com

The fully renovated Little Palm Island Resort & Spa has reopened on a secluded island off Little Torch Key in the Lower Keys. The exclusive adults-only property offers 2,480 total square feet of oceanview meeting and event space, including the 1,080-square-foot Sunset Terrace, 450-square-foot Sunrise Terrace and 950-square-foot Great Room. Venues can be one space or separate. littlepalmsisland.com

The 100-room The Perry Hotel Key West at Stock Island Marina Village has a variety of meeting venues: the 1,300-square-foot Matt’s Stock Island Kitchen & Bar, a 1,340-square-foot rum distillery offering tours, a 2,980-square-foot pool deck and 1,630-square-foot pool bar, a 3,200-square-foot event lawn and a 545-square-foot VIP Terrace Lounge. The resort offers the Keys’ largest deep-water marina, accommodating boats with up to a 12-foot draft. perrykeywest.com/meetings-and-events

Key West Marriott Beachside, with 129 one-, two-, and three-bedroom suites and 93 king rooms, offers a 5,673-square-foot ballroom and 10,000 square feet of meeting space with 2,000 square feet of waterfront patio and 16 boat slips. Its ballroom can seat 440 at a sit-down dinner. beachsidekeywest.com

Kimpton Key West’s new collection of five boutique properties, unveiled in 2020, offers outdoor gathering space for incentive getaways. kimptonkeywest.com

Also in Key West, sister properties Casa Marina Key West, A Waldorf Astoria Resort, and The Reach Key West, Curio Collection by Hilton, have beaches on the Atlantic Ocean. Casa Marina, with 311 rooms and suites, offers the island’s largest meeting facility with 11,000 square feet of indoor event space and the largest private beach. Newly renovated, The Reach Key West, with 150 rooms and suites, has Key West’s only private natural beach. Facilities can accommodate up to 300 with over 4,000 square feet of indoor event space. casamarinaresort.com or reachresort.com

The new 184-room Barbary Beach House Key West across from Smathers Beach features a 1,500-square-foot event palapa (open hut with thatched roof crafted from dried palm leaves), Hobie Cat sailboats, paddleboards and kayaks. barbarybeachhousekeywest.com

Key West’s 216-room DoubleTree by Hilton Grand Key Resort offers 7,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor meeting space. Its ballroom can seat 200 or accommodate up to 300 at a reception. The property completed a $7.5 million renovation in 2016. doubletree3.hilton.com

Online academy aids travel pros

A web-based video-learning platform provides travel professionals with education to become certified Florida Keys destination specialists.

Key Lime Academy uses seven video-driven modules to educate participants on Keys properties, attractions and history. Each module is followed by an eight-to-10-question quiz in multiple-choice format.

The process takes about 30 minutes and can be done either incrementally or in a single sitting. When the user has completed the entire e-learning series and passed all quizzes with a grade of 80 percent or better, an electronic certificate is issued.

Key Lime Academy is offered on the Keys tourism council’s official website at fla-keys.com/kla-mice.
Rich experiences highlight meeting trends in Keys

By Laura Myers
Photos by Andy Newman

The Florida Keys, with authentic indigenous experiences, healthy cuisine and relaxed activities for visitors, offer a rich 125-mile-long setting for meetings of virtually all types. The island chain’s eco-attractive, offshore fishing and fascinating history provide engaging, interactive opportunities for enrichment and enjoyment.

In Key Largo, Ocean Reef Club’s partnership with the Coral Restoration Foundation enables groups “to contribute by taking either a snorkeling or scuba-diving trip to a coral nursery and helping to plant coral on the reef,” said Rudy Gonella, executive director of sales. “These team-building events allow groups to be a part of this nonprofit conservation organization while putting life back into the ocean.” oceanreef.com

Key Largo’s Playa Largo Resort & Spa is targeting travel groups, executive board meetings and incentive retreats. “With our location, caliber of service, and dedication to cleanliness, we’re ideal for these types of groups,” said Valerie Pagan, director of sales. playalargoresort.com

Planners booking Islamorada Resort Collection’s four properties — Amara Cay Resort, La Siesta, Pelican Cove and Postcard Inn in Islamorada — strive to create memories. “No more of the cookie-cutter classroom-style meetings. They want specialty menus, customized meeting packages, intimate dining, things that can make attendees’ experiences memorable,” said Mark Calibo, regional director of sales and marketing for the Florida Keys Ocean Properties, which manages Islamorada Resort Collection. islamoradaresortcollection.com

At Islamorada’s Islander Resort, “we see many smaller incentive groups combining meetings and fun activities,” said Dan Martin, director of sales and marketing. islanderfloridakeys.com

At nearby Cheeca Lodge, dining requests include current foodie trends of Asian noodle bowls and poké dishes. Team-building activities with wine, beer and spirits tastings are included in offerings such as paint-and-sip classes with a local artist. “Creating these types of experiences allows us the opportunity to make a meeting or event truly destination-specific and infuse some authentic Islamorada and Florida Keys flavor,” said Brianna Birtles, Cheeca’s director of sales and marketing. cheeca.com
Marathon’s Faro Blanco Resort & Yacht Club, known for its signature landmark lighthouse built in the 1950s, offers charter excursions. “You can choose a private charter boat to host a board meeting on the beautiful waters of the Keys,” said Ashley Keeney, area director of sales and marketing. faroblancoresort.com

Marriott Key West Beachside offers about 10,000 square feet of meeting space with a 5,675-square-foot ballroom in Key West. “Having the largest ballroom in Key West, we enjoy good demand year-round,” said Alan Beaubien, Beachside’s director of sales and marketing. beachsidekeywest.com

Casa Marina, A Waldorf Astoria Resort, and The Reach Key West, a Curio Collection by Hilton, offer over 15,000 square feet of combined indoor meeting space. Groups are “quickly immersed in the Key West lifestyle with team-building activities from sand sculpting workshops to sunset cruises and snorkel tours,” said Andrew Rosuck, director of sales and marketing. Hilton’s EventReady program ensures enhanced cleaning and social distancing measures. casamarinaresort.com or reachresort.com

The Margaritaville Resort & Marina can stage receptions for groups up to 80 in its Paradise Cottage at Sunset Key Cottages on a private island just 500 yards offshore, accessible via an eight-minute boat ride. Indigenous culinary offerings include a whole-fish grouper taco carving station. Margaritaville features 6,000 square feet of meeting space. margaritavillekeywestresort.com
Planners of meetings, incentive events and corporate retreats typically seek unique experiences that connect them to a destination. Relaxing offshore activities, enjoying the Keys’ scenic outdoors and bucket-list adventures are what the Florida Keys are all about.

A fishing charter, for example, in waters off the Keys is an adventure made memorable by catches such as sailfish, tarpon or yellowtail snapper.

A group hunt for the best Key lime pie is sure to satisfy all taste buds. Nearly every Keys dining venue serves this rich signature dessert.

For active groups, kayaking, swimming with dolphins and other experiential activities can be booked around the Keys. Among them:

Key Largo Bike and Adventure Tours offers Bike and Beer tours for up to 12 with a 10-mile trek from Tavernier to Islamorada. Participants can enjoy three stops for beer and a van ride back. In Islamorada, another tour visits historic venues, locations from the hit Netflix drama “Bloodline,” a Tiki bar and two craft breweries. keylargobike.com

At Florida Keys Aquarium Encounters in Marathon, groups can swim with and feed fishes while learning about the Keys’ marine ecosystem. There are four touch tanks and public feedings throughout the day. Private tours and events can be reserved. floridakeysaquariumencounters.com

Key West Hydrobikes offers hourly rentals and tours from four Key West locations. Cyclists on the pedal-powered nonmotorized water bikes can cross Key West Harbor to the back side of Wisteria Island to snorkel around the island. Average cruising speed is about 5 mph. Tours depart from LagerHeads, located at 0 Simonton St. keywesthydrobikes.com

Serenity Eco Therapy, based in Key Largo and offered throughout the Keys, combines gentle meditation, yoga and Pilates with a guided paddle in a kayak or on a stand-up paddleboard. A 2.5-hour tour promotes well-being. serenityecotherapy.squarespace.com

Crafting sand sculptures in Key West at the Casa Marina or The Reach is a way to build competitive team spirit or bonding. Just Sand and Water offers beach workshops for six to 150 participants. Facial coverings are provided and each group is at least 6 feet apart. justsandandwater.com

Key West Food Tours offers groups of 10 or less a 1.5-hour, 1-mile Old Town Culture Walk. With a local guide, guests sample conch fritters, fish tacos, Key lime pie and additional tastings while strolling through historic Old Town. keywestfoodtours.com

**Group activities build team bonding, trust**

The Florida Keys offer both casually funky and sophisticated dining for groups, with many menus highlighted by delectable sustainable seafood freshly caught from the Atlantic Ocean or scooped out of Florida Bay. Keys chefs are known for artfully creative preparations that blend indigenous seafood with tropical ingredients.

Companies booking a Keys meeting or retreat are likely to be focused on social responsibility and sustainability. Keys cuisine may be organically enhanced with lime, mango, avocado, papaya and coconut, while fish gracing a table was likely unloaded hours earlier onto a local dock.

Sweet stone crab claws, served with drawn butter or chilled with mustard sauce, are a renewable resource. Fishermen harvest only the claws, returning crabs to the sea where the claws regenerate.

An event’s menu might include yellowtail or mutton snapper, grouper or mahi-mahi. Meeting participants might especially enjoy a team-building catch-and-cook fishing event, with fish they catch served grilled, broiled, blackened, baked or fried.

Key West pink shrimp — light, flavorful and generally sweeter than other crustaceans — are bountiful.

Spiny clawless Florida lobsters, served steamed or broiled with drawn butter, are another favorite.

No Florida Keys meal is complete without the island chain’s renowned Key lime pie.

**Keys feature fresh indigenous seafood**

Fresh seafood from the Florida Keys.
Unconventional Keys venues make meetings memorable

In the Florida Keys, meetings can be hosted at offbeat, unconventional venues — a one-of-a-kind marine attraction, the home of a literary legend or even the vacation residence of a former president.

At Bud N’ Mary’s Fishing Marina in Islamorada, a 9,000-square-foot steel building is situated on the Atlantic Ocean with an on-site kitchen and a chef providing dining options for events of up to 250 people. There’s also a beach and four houseboats, five standard rooms, a penthouse suite and two houses. budnmarys.com

Robbie’s Marina is a popular Islamorada waterfront hub, nestled among coconut palms on Florida Bay with eclectic outdoor vendors. Planners can charter fishing trips for groups. The on-site “old Keys-style” Hungry Tarpon Restaurant cooks up the catch for a fresh fish meal. Participants can even feed the resident tarpon fish. robbies.com

Theater of the Sea in Islamorada offers dolphin and sea lion shows for up to 200 at private evening events. Customized options include a private tour of marine life exhibits, photographs with parrots or a choreography of dolphin behaviors set to music. theaterofthesea.com

Dolphin Research Center on Grassy Key near Marathon offers group activities at the nonprofit facility that’s home to bottlenose dolphins and California sea lions. Private tours, educational sessions and interactive experiences can be booked. Planners can organize private group events for up to 200 or host meetings or workshops inside the Welcome Center building’s two private rooms, each accommodating up to 50 people. An on-site director of guest services helps plan events. dolphins.org

In Key West, groups can hold events at the Ernest Hemingway Home & Museum in Key West, where the famed author lived and wrote in the 1930s.

Home & Museum, a Spanish colonial villa where famed author and Nobel Prize winner Ernest Hemingway lived and wrote some of his most famous works in the 1930s. The grounds are available for up to 100 people. hemingwayhome.com

Key West’s Harry S. Truman Little White House Museum, Florida’s only presidential museum, is a unique function venue. The late American president spent more than six months at this tropical retreat during his 1945-1953 administration. Grounds can accommodate groups, while smaller gatherings can use the president’s dining and living rooms and south porch. trumanlittlewhitehouse.com

The Studios of Key West, housed in a Deco-style former Scottish Rite Masonic Center off Duval Street, hosts private receptions and provides meeting space including a 2,175-square-foot theater, art gallery, nine studios, two 600-square-foot classrooms, a 1,500-square-foot gallery for receptions and a fourth-story rooftop terrace with a stage and sound system. tskw.org

‘Up the Keys’ travels off the beaten path

Up the Keys Eco Tours offers driving sightseeing tours and new yoga and Key West walking tours. The yoga tour, with door-to-door service in 15-passenger vans, offers instruction at an off-the-beaten-path location with a certified yoga instructor for a minimum of six guests. Walking tours are customized to feature history and architecture, ghosts, pubs, happy hours and a “welcome to Key West.” upthekeys.com

Hemingway Rum Co. plans new venue

Key West’s 8,200-square-foot Hemingway Rum Co. Distillery plans to open a new 2,400-square-foot events facility in 2021. Formerly a tobacco warehouse, the venue houses the Papa’s Pilar Rum production facility, an experience center, tasting room and trading post. The site is located at 201 Simonton St. papaspilar.com
The 125-mile-long Florida Keys island chain is linked to mainland Florida by U.S. Highway 1, the Florida Keys Overseas Highway. Visitors can fly into Miami International Airport (MIA) or Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL) and from there can reach the Keys by airport shuttle bus or rental car. Travelers can drive from Miami to Key Largo, the gateway to the Keys, in about an hour or just under two hours from Fort Lauderdale.

**Air Service to the Florida Keys**

For an up-to-date roster of commercial airlines and on-demand charter operators serving Key West International and Florida Keys Marathon International Airports, go to fla-keys.com/how-to-get-here.

**Driving Directions**

From Miami International Airport (MIA), take LeJeune Road south to 836 West. Take the Florida Turnpike (State Road 91) south toward Key West.

The Turnpike ends at U.S. 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south about 22 miles to Key Largo and you and your travel companions will be in the Florida Keys.

From Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL), exit the airport and follow the signs for I–95 South. Take 595 to the Florida Turnpike and follow the signs for the Florida Keys.

From farther north, take the Florida Turnpike south to just below Fort Lauderdale, where Exit 4 joins the southern portion of the Turnpike that ends at U.S. 1 in Florida City. Follow U.S. 1 south into the Florida Keys.

**Driving Data to Keys/Key Largo**

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**Via Bus**

Bus/shuttle connections from MIA and FLL to the Florida Keys allow traveling to the Keys without renting a car.

**Via Boat**

Ferry connections from Fort Myers or Marco Island to Key West are offered via the Key West Express. Voyages take approximately 3.5 hours.

Extensive details on getting to the Florida Keys & Key West are available at: fla-keys.com/how-to-get-here

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**Weather/Climate**

Wherever you are right now, chances are the weather is better in the Florida Keys. That’s true even on a summer day. The hottest it’s ever been in Key West is 97° F (36° C), and that was in 1880. At summer’s peak, the average high air temperature is about 89° F (32° C). The Keys are devoid of superhighways or urban sprawl to absorb and radiate the sun’s heat.

And the islands are cooled by sea breezes.

In the winter, the Keys are typically the warmest region in the continental U.S. There has never been a frost in Key West, according to the U.S. Weather Service.

Below are past 30-year monthly air temperatures, according to the Key West weather office. Temperatures in blue shades are Fahrenheit and those in red are Celsius.

**Help and More Information**

If you’re traveling in the Keys and need any help, call the toll-free visitors assistance line at 800-771-KEYS. It’s staffed 24 hours a day. To contact visitor offices in the Keys, call 800-FLAKEYS. The Keys website at fla-keys.com has a live chat feature with visitor specialists available during U.S. weekday business hours to aid travelers.